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Equalizing Reserve Component Care and Benefit

Prepared remarks by Deborah Lee, assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs, at the Air Force Reserve Senior Leaders Conference, Washington, Jan. 27, 1998.

In the late 18th century, the Anglo-Irish writer Jonathan Swift caustically remarked on the seeming futility of flight: "The bulk of mankind," he said, "is as well equipped for flying as thinking."

Not a very pleasant guy, and fortunately for us he was wrong.

Many years later, in the first year of this century, a man on a windy stretch of the North Carolina coast turned to his brother and said, "Man won't fly for a thousand years."

The man was Wilbur Wright, speaking to his brother Orville after a disappointing flying experiment. Fortunately, he, too, was wrong, and the Wright brothers soon turned their dream into a reality. Man soon flew higher, faster and further than the Wright brothers had ever imagined was possible.

Today, as we approach the 50th anniversary of the Air Force Reserve, it is useful to recall that creative thought, hard work and imaginative leadership can overcome the greatest of obstacles and the loudest of skeptics. Which, I suppose, is one very complex introduction to the simple phrase: "Happy Birthday, Air Force Reserve!"

Birthdays tend to remind me of stories, and today it is no exception.

Two colonels, each attending their respective war colleges, Army War College and Air War College, friends for 20-plus years, were each doing extensive research papers on Joint Professional Military Education (JPME). It was a semester-long project, they were nearing the end of the semester, and the topic had become pretty boring by that time. It was getting close to the Christmas holiday break, and they were speaking on the phone, commiserating about how much they wished their projects were over and submitted.

During the discussion, the Air Force colonel suggested that each should weave into their papers a comment or two about who they thought was the one officer from each service who had been the most significant and effective leader, and whose decisions and leadership were still being felt around their service today. They agreed, but in the spirit of JPME, the Army colonel would research for an Air Force figure and the Air Force colonel would find the one true Army figure.

After the holidays, just prior to submission of their papers, they talked again. The Army colonel said that he really enjoyed the task and benefited profoundly.

He said that he found only one Air Force figure that met all the criteria -- Gen. Curtis LeMay [former Air Force chief of staff]. The Air Force colonel with widened eyes smiled and heartily agreed, exclaiming how profoundly impressed he was with his friend's research and depth of understanding of the Air Force to have arrived at Gen. LeMay.

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The Army colonel asked the Air Force colonel how his research had come along. The Air Force colonel said his research had been exhaustive and very frustrating. His research revealed two equally heroic figures that truly met the criteria, were of historic proportion, and he was simply deadlock[ed] in his opinion.

Smitten with a supercharged curiosity and excitement that he had not felt since his days at [U.S. Military Academy,] West Point [N.Y.], the Army colonel asked who these two behemoths of leadership were.

With a sigh of accomplishment and a twinkle in his eye, the Air Force colonel said, "It's a toss-up between [Henry H.] "Hap" Arnold [former general of the Air Forces] and [Brig. Gen.] Billy Mitchell [assistant to the chief of the Air Service in 1921]!!!"

Seriously, on the occasion of your birthday, I want to congratulate you for your dedicated service to the nation, for your sacrifice, for your courage and for your leadership.

All these elements have helped make the Air Force Reserve synonymous with success.

The active Air Force and the CinCs rely on you to get the job done.

And you have proved time and again, in the Persian Gulf, in Haiti, Bosnia, Turkey, Central America, the Caribbean and around the world on a daily basis, that you are able to respond immediately and effectively, that you can meet the challenges and fulfill the mission requirements, that you are ready for the challenges of today and preparing today for the challenges of tomorrow -- challenges which include resource allocation; the support of civilian employers; compensation and benefits for reservists and their families; the modernization and upgrade of equipment; investments in military construction; and enhanced state-of-the-art training devices.

You are the model for the other reserve components: fully integrated, highly accessible, absolutely professional and thoroughly reliable, with a strong focus on your greatest assets -- the men and women who serve in the Air Force Reserve.

The quality of life of our people is also at the top of Secretary [of Defense Williams S.] Cohen's agenda and my agenda as well. We see it as the right thing to do and the smart thing to do for readiness and integration.

Let me tell you about some of our recent initiatives. The coming year will be the year of health in reserve affairs. And to kick it off, we have begun hosting the first-ever Reserve Health Care Summit.

The idea is to review practices and laws begun in the Cold War to ensure that they make sense in today's world and are consistent with today's environment.

As we envision it, the summit will have three phases.

Phase 1 will explore the whole range of health-related issues that affect reserve component personnel. In this phase, we need to reach a consensus in DoD on what appropriate health care requirements are, who will be accountable for meeting those requirements, and who will pay the cost. We're focusing on medical and dental exams, medical readiness requirements and important immunization procedures, including those for the provision of anthrax.

We're also looking to enhance deployment surveillance, to watch what happens to reserve troops before, during and after deployments. Finally, we'll be working to ensure timely health support when a member incurs or aggravates an injury or illness while serving on duty. Many of you are familiar with a tragic case which illustrates just how important it is that we get this final point done right.

When one of our C-130s crashed last year in Honduras, the crew was a mix of active and Reserve personnel. The reservists were on active duty for less than 30 days. When their orders expired, they had to apply for incapacitation pay and were no longer covered under the active duty health care provisions

and laws.

Of course, the active duty personnel onboard that day -- and their dependents -- could count on the system to take care of them. But the system didn't work as it should have for our reserve personnel. We need to change that and other inequities that may exist.

And I'm happy to say that the FY [fiscal year] 98 Authorization Act included a change in the law which now allows us to extend the orders of reserve personnel who are being treated, or who are recovering from, an injury or illness incurred while on active duty. And the law now clarifies that, when those orders are extended beyond 30 days, dependents of reservists are medically eligible for the same benefits as other active duty dependents.

This is good news, but there may be other holes in the system we need to fix.

During Phase 2, we will be looking closely at those members of the National Guard and reserves who sustain a permanent injury or illness during service. Here's the problem: Reservists have not been able, on a consistent basis, to get into the disability system and be processed like their active duty counterparts. They can end up separated with no benefits. This is not fair.

The system needs to be made consistent and equitable for everyone -- active, Guard and Reserve.

At the moment, once reserve component personnel do get into the system, distinctions are still being made on the basis of status. They are either regarded as full-time active duty or "other." We are working to put an end to these distinctions. Our philosophy is that the system should treat the disability, not the status of the person being treated.

During Phase 3, we will be working closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the provider for veterans, including reservists, who have long-term health care problems.

This partnership will allow us to ensure continued care for our reserve veterans upon their release or separation from military service.

If our personnel are separated from service because of an injury, illness or disease that has been incurred or aggravated during service, we want to treat and recognize these people within the VA system just like any other veteran.

So the Reserve Health Summit will be doing important work over next several months.

Another health-related area that we are working is the TRICARE Selected Reserve Dental Program. As you know, this dental insurance provides an enrolled member with routine preventative and emergency services. This program, which began last October, is voluntary. Monthly member premiums are less than \$5. Thus far, over 20,000 members of the Selected Reserve have applied.

This is a win-win situation: Our Selected Reserve members receive dental care that improves their overall health as well as the readiness of our force.

I urge you to help us spread the good news about this program.

Leaving health and turning to a variety of other concerns:

We will also be looking at a variety of parity of benefits issues over the next year. For example, the newly authorized Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH), which replaced BAQ [basic allowance for quarters] and VHA [variable housing allowance], permits the secretary of defense to establish the rate of housing allowance for reservists on active duty for less than 140 days.

The 140-day threshold relates back to the old trigger for the Variable Housing Allowance, so it was adapted for BAH.

My concern is, I'm not sure that this threshold still makes sense in today's environment of frequent deployments. We intend to work closely with the Force Management Policy Compensation Directorate to review the issue and determine what housing allowance is equitable and appropriate.

We are also focusing on family readiness and family support for dependents of deployed reservists. Family support has improved dramatically since Operation Desert Storm but we are committed to finding even better ways to support families who are not located near military installations, where family support services are typically available.

New joint and reserve family support systems are being established to address this need. In fact, the first Joint Family Support Center recently started operating in Minnesota at the 934th Air Lift Wing -- it's Air Force Reserve, naturally. And we hope to make this outstanding center the model for similar ventures across the country.

Another area of work for us is the use of accrued leave by reserve component members on orders in excess of 30 days. Mission constraints often limit the opportunities for reservists to use leave while on active duty. Currently, if reservists don't use their leave, they can sell back 60 days in a career.

We plan to develop and pursue a legislative proposal to allow reserve component members the opportunity to sell back unused accrued leave in excess of 60 days per career if the member is prevented from taking leave during a period of active duty that is less than one year.

And, as I said yesterday in my remarks at the opening ceremonies, we are closely studying transportation policy and reserve use of the commissaries to ensure greater equity for our personnel.

In short, we are looking at the whole panoply of issues as they affect reserve component personnel in this era of increased use. None of this is easy -- dollar issues and sacred cows make our task a difficult one.

You have all heard the anecdotes about how readiness in some active Air Force units may be fragile, how perstempo [personnel tempo] is driving away pilots for more lucrative airline jobs.

And you have probably heard about planes being cannibalized for parts. This declining readiness -- anecdotal or otherwise -- is not yet apparent within the Air Force Reserve. Good recruiting/retention and readiness help contribute to your success in this area.

But we all know that there is a breaking point somewhere out there on the horizon, and we need to know from you where that breaking point is and what we can do to keep from reaching it. I welcome your input and will work closely with [Maj.] Gen. [Robert A.] McIntosh [chief of Air Force Reserve]. And as I said yesterday, I welcome your input on identifying any barriers to total force integration. When it comes to integration, you're our superstars and we're deeply appreciative of all that you do. Thank you very much.

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